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# COVENTRY PATMORE

BY ARTHUR SYMONS

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THE most austere poet of our time, Coventry Patmore, conceived of art as a sort of abstract ecstasy, whose source, limit, and end are that supreme wisdom which is the innermost essence of love. Thus the whole of his work, those "bitter, sweet, few and veiled" songs, which are the fruit of two out of his seventy years, is love-poetry; and it is love-poetry of a quite unique kind. In the earlier of his two books, *The Angel in the House*, we see him, in the midst of a scientific generation (in which it was supposed that by adding prose to poetry you doubled the value of poetry) unable to escape the influence of his time, desperately set on doing the wrong thing by design, yet unable to keep himself from often doing the right thing by accident. In his later book, *The Unknown Eros*, he has achieved the proper recognition of himself, the full consciousness of the means to his own end; and it is by *The Unknown Eros* that he will live, if it is enough claim to immortality to have written the most devout, subtle, and sublimated love-poetry of our century.

Patmore tells us in *The Angel in the House* that it was his intention to write

That hymn for which the whole world longs,  
A worthy hymn in woman's praise.

But at that time his only conception of woman was the conception of woman as the lady. Now poetry has nothing whatever to do with woman as the lady; it is in the novel, the comedy of manners, that we expect the society of ladies. Prose, in the novel and the drama, is at liberty to concern itself with those secondary emotions which come into play in our familiar intercourse with one another; with those conventions which are the "evening dress" by

which our varying temperaments seek the disguise of an outward uniformity; with those details of life which are also, in a sense, details of costume, and thus of value to the teller of a tale, the actor on a stage. But the poet who endeavours to bring all this machinery of prose into the narrow and self-sufficing limits of verse is as fatally doomed to failure as the painter who works after photographs, instead of from the living model. At the time when *The Angel* was written, the heresy of the novel in verse was in the air. Were there not, before and after it, the magnificent failure of *Aurora Leigh*, the ineffectual, always interesting, endeavours of Clough, and certain more careful, more sensitive, never quite satisfactory, experiments of Tennyson? Patmore went his own way, to a more ingenious failure than any. *The Angel in the House* is written with exquisite neatness, occasional splendour; it is the very flower of the poetry of convention; and is always lifting the trivialities and the ingenuities to which, for the most part, it restricts itself, miraculously near to that height which, now and again, in such lines as "The Revelation," it fully attains. But it is not here, it is in *The Unknown Eros* alone, that Patmore has given immortality to what is immortal in perishable things.

How could it be otherwise, when the whole force of the experiment lies in the endeavour to say essentially unpoetical things in a poetical manner?

Give me the power of saying things  
Too simple and too sweet for words,

was his wise, reasonable, and afterwards answered prayer. Was it after the offering of such a prayer that he wrote of

Briggs,  
Factotum, Footman, Butler, Groom?

But it is not merely of such "vulgar errors" as this that we have to complain, it is of the very success, the indisputable achievement, of all but the most admirable parts of the poem. The subtlety, the fineness of analysis, the simplified complexity, of such things as "The Changed Allegiance," can scarcely be overpraised as studies in "the dreadful heart of woman," from the point of view of a shrewd, kindly, somewhat condescending, absolutely clear-eyed observer, so dispassionate that he has not even the privilege of an illusion, so impartial that you do not even

do his fervour the compliment of believing it possible that his perfect Honoria had, after all, defects. But in all this, admirable as it is, there is nothing which could not have been as well said in prose. It is the point of view of the egoist, of the "marrying man," to whom

Each beauty blossomed in the sight  
Of tender personal regard.

Woman is observed always in reference to the man who fancies she may prove worthy to be his "predestined mate," and it seems to him his highest boast that he is

proud  
To take his passion into church.

At its best, this is the poetry of "being in love," not of love; of affection, not passion. Passion is a thing of flame, rarely burning pure, or without danger to him that holds that wind-blown torch in his hand; while affection, such as this legalized affection of *The Angel in the House*, is a gentle and comfortable warmth, as of a hearth-side. It is that excellent, not quite essential, kind of love which need endure neither pain nor revolt; for it has conquered the world on the world's terms.

Woman, as she is seen in *The Angel in the House*, is a delightful, adorable, estimable, prettily capricious child; demonstrably finite, capturable, a butterfly not yet Psyche. It is the severest judgment on her poet that she is never a mystery to him. For all art is founded on mystery, and to the poet, as to the child, the whole world is mysterious. There are experts who tell me that this world, and life, and the flowing of times past into times to come, are but a simple matter after all: the jarring of this atom against that, a growth by explicable degrees from a germ perhaps not altogether inexplicable. And there are the experts in woman, who will explain to me the bright disarray of her caprices, the strangeness of her moods, the unreason of her sway over man; assuring me that she is mysterious only because she is not seen through, and that she can never be seen through because into the depths of emptiness one can see but a little distance. Not of such is the true lover, the true poet. To him woman is as mysterious as the night of stars, and all he learns of her is but to deepen the mystery which surrounds her as with clouds. To him she is Fate, an unconscious part of what is eternal in things;

and, being the liveliest image of beauty, she is to be revered for her beauty, as the saints are revered for their virtue. What is it to me if you tell me that she is but the creature of a day, prized for her briefness, as we prize flowers; loved for her egoism, as we love infants; marvelled at for the exquisite and audacious completeness of her ignorance? Or what is it to me if you tell me that she is all that a lady should be, infinitely perfect in pettiness; and that her choice will reward the calculations of a gentleman? If she is not a flame, devouring and illuminating, and if your passion for her is not as another consuming and refining flame, each rushing into either that both may be comingled in a brighter ecstasy, you have not seen woman as it is the joy of the poet and the lover to see her; and your fine distinctions, your disentangling of sensations, your subtleties of interpretation, will be at the best but of the subject of prose, revealing to me what is transitory in the eternal rather than what is eternal in the transitory.

The art of Coventry Patmore, in *The Angel in the House*, is an art founded on this scientific conception of woman. But the poet, who began by thinking of woman as being at her best a perfect lady, ended by seeing her seated a little higher than the angels, at the right hand of the Madonna, of whom indeed she is a scarcely lower symbol. She who was a bright and cherished toy in *The Angel in the House* becomes in *The Unknown Eros* pure spirit, the passionate sister of the pure idea. She is the mystical rose of beauty, the female half of that harmony of opposites which is God. She has other names, and is the Soul, the Church, the Madonna. To be her servant is to be the servant of all right, the enemy of all wrong; and therefore poems of fierce patriotism, and disdainful condemnation of the foolish and vulgar who are the adversaries of God's ordinances and man's, find their appropriate place among poems of tender human pathos, of ecstatic human and divine love. And she is now, at last, apprehended under her most essential aspect, as the supreme mystery and her worship becomes an almost secret ritual, of which none but the adepts can fathom the full significance.

Vision, in *The Unknown Eros*, is too swift, immediate and far-seeing to be clouded by the delicate veils of dreams.

Give me the steady heat  
 Of thought wise, splendid, sweet,  
 Urged by the great, rejoicing wind that rings  
 With draught of unseen wings,  
 Making each phrase, for love and for delight,  
 Twinkle like Sirius on a frosty night :

that is his prayer, and it was not needful for him to

remain

Content to ask unlikely gifts in vain.

Out of this love-poetry all but the very essence of passion has been consumed; and love is seen to be the supreme wisdom, even more than the supreme delight. Apprehended on every side, and with the same controlling ardor, those "frightful nuptials" of the Dove and Snake, which are one of his allegories, lead upward, on the wings of an almost aerial symbolism, to those all but inaccessible heights where mortal love dies into that intense, self-abnegating, intellectual passion, which we name the love of God.

At this height, at its very highest, his art becomes abstract ecstasy. It was one of his contentions, in that beautiful book of prose, *Religio Poetae*, in which thought is sustained throughout at almost the lyrical pitch, that the highest art is not emotional, and that "the music of Handel, the poetry of Æschylus, and the architecture of the Parthenon are appeals to a sublime good sense which takes scarcely any account of "the emotions." Not the highest art only, but all art, if it is so much as to come into existence, must be emotional; for it is only emotion which puts life into the death-like slumber of words, of stones, of the figures on a clef. But emotion may take any shape, may inform the least likely of substances. Is not all music a kind of divine mathematics, and is not mathematics itself a rapture to the true adept? To Patmore abstract things were an emotion, became indeed the highest emotion of which he was capable; and that joy, which he notes as the mark of fine art, that peace, which to him was the sign of great art, themselves, the most final of the emotions, interpenetrated for him the whole substance of thought, aspiration, even argument. Never were arguments at once so metaphysical and so mystical, so precise, analytic and passionate as those "high arguments" which fill these pages with so thrilling a life.

The particular subtlety of Patmore's mysticism finds

perhaps its counterpart in the writings of certain of the Catholic mystics: it has at once the clear-eyed dialectic of the Schoolmen and the august heat of St. Theresa. Here is passion which analyzes itself, and yet with so passionate a complexity that it remains passion. Read, for instance, that eulogy of "Pain," which is at once a lyric rapture, and betrays an almost unholy depth of acquaintance with the hidden, tortuous, and delightful way of sensation. Read that song of songs, "*Deliciae Sapientiae de Amore*," which seems to speak, with the tongue of angels, all the secrets of all those "to whom generous Love, by any name, is dear." Read that other, interrupted song,

Building new bulwarks 'gainst the infinite,

"*Legem tuam dilexi*." Read those perhaps less quintessential dialogues in which a personified Psyche seeks wisdom of Eros and the Pythoness. And then, if you would realize how subtle an argument in verse may be, how elegantly and happily expressed, and yet not approach, at its highest climb, the point from which these other arguments in verse take flight, turn to *The Angel in the House* and read "The Changed Allegiance." The difference is the difference between wisdom and worldly wisdom: wisdom being the purified and most ardent emotion of the intellect, and thus of the very essence of poetry; while worldly wisdom is but the dispassionate ingenuity of the intelligence, and thus of not so much as the highest substance of prose.

The word "glittering," which Patmore so frequently uses, and always with words which soften its sharpness, may be applied, not unsuitably, to much of his writing in this book: a "glittering peace" does indeed seem to illuminate it. The writing throughout is classical, in a sense in which perhaps no other writing of our time is classical. When he says of the Virgin:

Therefore, holding a little thy soft breath,  
Thou underwent'st the ceremony of death;

or, of the eternal paradox of love:

'Tis but in such captivity  
The unbounded Heavens know what they be;

when he cries:

O Love, that, like a rose,  
Deckest my breast with beautiful repose;

or speaks of "this fond indignity, delight"; he is, though with an entirely personal accent, writing in the purest classical tradition. He was accustomed always, in his counsels to young writers, to reiterate that saying of Aristotle, that in the language of poetry there should be "a continual slight novelty"; and I remember that he would point to his own work, with that legitimate pride in himself which was one of the fierce satisfactions of his somewhat lonely and unacknowledged old age. There is in every line of *The Unknown Eros* that continual slight novelty which makes classical poetry, certainly, classical. Learned in every metre, Patmore never wrote but in one, the iambic: and there was a similar restraint, a similar refusal of what was good, but not (as he conceived) the highest good, all strangeness of beauty, all trouble, curiosity, the splendor of excess, in the words and substance of his writing. I find no exception even in that fiercely aristocratic political verse, which is the very rapture of indignation and wrath against such things as seemed to him worthy to be hated of God.

Like Landor, with whom he had other points of resemblance, Coventry Patmore was a good hater. May one not say, like all great lovers? He hated the mob, because he saw in it the "amorous and vehement drift of man's herd to hell." He hated Protestantism, because he saw in it a weakening of the bonds of spiritual order. He hated the Protestantism of modern art, its revolt against the tradition of the "true Church," the many heresies of its many wanderings after a strange, perhaps forbidden, beauty. Art was to him religion, as religion was to him the supreme art. He was a mystic who found in Catholicism the sufficing symbols of those beliefs which were the deepest emotions of his spirit. It was a necessity to him to be dogmatic, and he gave to even his petulances the irresistible sanction of the Church.

ARTHUR SYMONS.